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ABSTRACT

The tendency to read for errors is an occupational hazard for writing teachers, but there is something profoundly wrong in measuring progress by measuring the reduction of errors. To begin breaking this habit, teachers must first recognize the fundamental hypocrisy in making correction markings that are at odds with the intended message (i.e., letters or word fragments to signify a sentence fragment). Also, many errors defy classification and cannot be remedied by such simple coded instruction. Most important, however, is the fact that doggedly reading for errors keeps the reader from seeing anything else. Error markings in passages by notable authors trip the reader on the errors, while reading those same passages void of the correction marks evokes in the reader the images and emotions intended by the authors. This is not to say that teachers should stop noticing errors altogether. They have a duty to help students correct errors that leap out and disconcert the reader, but they should not read for errors to the exclusion of everything else. They have a duty to listen for the human voice in student papers as well, to believe that every student paper may contain at least one sentence that is remarkably good, however flawed by errors, and to show the student what he or she has done right. (HTH)

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Getting the Red Out: Grading without Degrading

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GETTING THE RED OUT: GRADING WITHOUT DEGRADING

Anyone who teaches English is all too familiar with the paranoid reaction commonly elicited by the disclosure of this fact to a new acquaintance. Long ago I learned a useful way to combat the paranoia. "I never correct anyone's grammar," I say, "unless I'm getting paid for it." The trouble with this line, however, is it reinforces the popular conception of what English teachers are paid to do--which is precisely to correct errors of all kinds: grammatical, punctuational, orthographical, structural--to diagnose and cure all the thousand natural ills that student writing is heir to.

Of course we don't like to believe that all we do for a living is correct mistakes, or help students correct them. Most of us teach a certain amount of literature in or out of writing courses, and even when we teach writing pure and simple--which of course it never is--we like to believe or at any rate we early want our students to believe that writing is something more than the art of avoiding errors. And yet we as teachers know how hard it is for us to avoid treating it that way, especially when we come to the grading of papers. Most of us are in fact occupationally conditioned to hunt for errors like bloodhounds on the scent of their prey. I know in any case that I am conditioned that way. Until fairly recently I believed that whenever I read a piece of writing by a student, I had a sacred duty to circle and identify every error, to let no dangling modifier or comma splice or sentence fragment or misspelled word pass unnoticed or unstigmatized. And when I came to the end of a paper, and looked back over the bloody field of my own red raging at the ubiquity of error, I would struggle to say something about the writer's ideas--insofar as I could reconstruct or remember them at all--before denouncing the unconscionable carelessness of the writing itself.

The tendency to read for error--not for pleasure, discovery, stimulation, or enlightenment but for error above all else--is an occupational hazard built

into the job we do. As teachers of writing we of course presume that all of our students need help with their prose, but we don't know just what kind of help they need until they've written something, at which point we commonly tell them what's wrong with their writing and how to fix it up. And the more precise we can be in identifying the kinds and calculating the number of the errors they make, the more effective we can be--or seem to be--in helping them improve. If we want to be able to measure the progress of our students by objective means, the temptation to do so by simply measuring the reduction of error is virtually irresistible. We cannot measure such mysterious things as rhetorical impact, originality, imagination, and style--the very things that make reading a pleasure; but we can keep flow charts of errors in various categories, and we can take pedagogical pride in watching the number of errors drop from one week to the next. When a student begins one of our courses at a rate of five sentence fragments per page and gradually reduces that to none at all by the end of the course, we can say to ourselves and our chairpersons and most importantly to our deans, yea and verily, we have accomplished something. We have done our pedagogical duty; we have earned a raise.

Nevertheless, some twenty years of grading papers has convinced me that there is something profoundly wrong about this way of responding to what students write. And the first thing wrong with it is the color of the ink in which the response is traditionally written: red. Red can sometimes deliver a positive charge; it is the color of desire and excitement, the color of a good many lipsticks, the color of magical sunsets and of the sails we are supposed to see by their enchantingly brilliant light. But the red of the marking pen carries none of these associations. Its red is the color of outrage, eye irritation, embarrassment, stop lights, stop signs, fire engines, warning, danger, red alert. The red ink with which we diligently circle every error tells the student, in effect, that writing a sentence is like picking one's way through a minefield

that explodes in a blinding flash at every step: not quite killing, to be sure, but wounding, so that in the end what the student has written becomes a pulpy mass of bleeding holes to be somehow bandaged over by corrections until the wounds are re-opened when the next paper is graded.

A partial solution to this problem is to stop using red ink and start using green, for green says go rather than stop, and that is the message that our students much more often need to hear. But of course the occupational habit of reading for error cannot be broken or extirpated by the mere act of changing the color of our ink. To begin the process of breaking the habit--and I speak as one who is still in the process of doing so--we must first recognize the fundamental hypocrisy in our holy war against errors. Take the battle against the sentence fragment as a case in point. Though nearly all teachers of writing now acknowledge, with varying degrees of reluctance, that sentence fragments are not necessarily incompatible with good writing, the sentence fragment epitomizes the kind of error that most of us feel duty-bound to circle and identify in big bold letters: FRAG, or SF. Yet pause a moment to consider the irony in this kind of notation. Though we condemn our students for writing what we call sentence fragments, our own comments to them are not even complete words: they are word fragments--mere letters, teachspeak, a code that operates on what is figuratively as well as literally the mere margin of language. In this as in so many other aspects of the grading process we are indeed telling our students to do ^{like} we say do, not do like we do. We sometimes write complete words in the margins of student papers, but how often do we write complete sentences?

Even when we write complete sentences, they all too often fail to follow the rules we relentlessly impose on our students. Not long ago I caught myself writing this sentence in the margin of a student paper:

You use the dash incorrectly here--you need a semicolon between the clauses.

I changed my own dash to a semicolon, of course, but even as I did so I realized the arbitrariness of the rule that was now being used to rap my own knuckles along with those of the student. To say anything to students in writing is to realize anew the difficulty of saying anything at all without making what could be called an error, without breaking one of the scores of rules that we insist our students know and obey. The new word processors now promise to make all of us automatically perfect spellers, but I do not believe they will keep that promise, and even if they could, I do not believe that any word processor could be programmed to keep all errors at bay. To err is human, and to write is to experience the human inevitability of error. No matter how often or how meticulously I proof-read, I find errors in my own writing, even after it appears in print, even after it has been checked by expert professional copywriters. Yet the gospel we preach to our students is that they must write by the rules, must purify themselves from error, must be correct at all times. Here is an excerpt from an official guide to the correction symbols used on student papers-- a guide recently issued by the English department of a well-known New England college:

RO Do not run one independent clause into another. Use a period between them, a semicolon, or a conjunction [sic] such as and or but.

Sp Spell correctly.

I keep and cherish this set of injunctions as a permanent reminder that we are all fallible; as my 11-year-old son is fond of saying, "Everybody make mistakes."

The recognition of our own capacity for error is the beginning of wisdom, but it is not of course the end, and hypocrisy is not the only problem inherent in the war against error. For the most part, the practice of reading for errors is based on the assumption that all errors can be classified. Yet anyone who has ever graded a set of papers knows that this is false, that students have an infinite and exasperating capacity to generate sentences that confuse or discomfort

or irritate us in ways that defy classification, that cannot be neatly identified, that cannot be readily remedied by any coded piece of instruction in any handbook, and I do mean any handbook. That is why we who tirelessly ask that our students be more precise and more specific so often find ourselves writing in the margins of their papers such wonderfully precise and specific comments as "awkward," "stiff," "contorted," "muddy," "confused," or simply--in the memorable words of one grand old master of the old school--"not English." The determination to classify every single error that a student makes leads at last to the sobering discovery that we cannot classify all errors, and to the further discovery that even after a sentence or a paragraph or an entire essay has been purged of all classifiable errors, it may still be a crashing bore.

Yet the main thing wrong with the habit of doggedly reading for errors is neither hypocrisy nor the problem of classifying the unclassifiable. The main thing wrong with reading for errors is that it tends to keep us from seeing anything else. Here for illustration are five brief passages. They are each disfigured by one or more of the errors for which we regularly chastise our students, and I have marked and identified all of the errors as well as I can:

Shift in person

1. Not even a lark or an oriole, those mild plantation birds, ever visited

my clearing. No cockerels to crow nor hens to cackle in the yard. (No yard!) P

W.C.

but unfenced Nature reaching up to your very sills.] — FRAG.

l.c.

Here is a thicket of errors: two sentence fragments, or three, if you count the phrase after the exclamation point; otherwise the exclamation point has been most improperly dropped into the middle of the last sentence, which of course is not even a sentence, and is further marred by the incorrect capitalization of Nature and the shift in person--the confusing reference to your very sills just after the writer has spoken of my clearing. This is in fact the kind of passage at which the weary grader throws up his hands in dismay and despair

and begins to wonder whether perhaps it may still be possible to get into some other line of work.

2. Marianne would not let her proceed; and Elinor, satisfied that each felt their own error, wished to avoid any survey of the past that might weaken her sister's spirits.

AGR.
FAULTY

Here is a classic illustration of faulty agreement: the plural pronoun their is made to refer to the singular antecedent each.

- DM 3. Throwing aside the counterpane, there lay the tomahawk sleeping by the savage's side, as if it were a hatchet-faced baby.

Throwing aside the counterpane is of course a dangling modifier--an egregiously dangling modifier; nowhere in the sentence can we find its headword, the word that tells what or who did the throwing.

4. I have, believe me, not been an age in letting you take possession of me; the very first week I knew you I wrote myself your vassal; but burnt the Letter as the very next time I saw you I thought you manifested some dislike to me.

P

l.c. Here a semicolon is misused after the word vassal, improperly breaking up a compound verb phrase: wrote myself your vassal but burnt the Letter. And of course the word Letter is improperly capitalized.

- DM 5. The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

PRON.
REF.
UNCLEAR

Here we have yet another dangling modifier--Being bound down the river. The only possible headword is it, but this itself embodies an error because here is a

pronoun without a clear antecedent: is it the yawl of the first sentence or something merely implied by the opening of the second: the situation, the present state of the wind and tide? Here is yet another passage to tax the grader's patience: one error compounded by another.

By now you may have begun to smell a rat, may have begun to perceive that there is something more in these passages than a succession of errors. You may even have begun to suspect that you know wrote some of these passages, so perhaps it is time for me to confirm your suspicions. But before I do I want to replace the marked-up versions with the originals -- not with corrected versions of the originals but with the originals themselves, warts and all:

1. Not even a lark or an oriole, those mild plantation birds, ever visited my clearing. No cockerels to crow nor hens to cackle in the yard. No yard! but unfenced Nature reaching up to your very sills.
2. Marianne would not let her proceed; and Elinor, satisfied that each felt their own error, wished to avoid any survey of the past that might weaken her sister's spirits.
3. Throwing aside the counterpane, there lay the tomahawk sleeping by the savage's side, as if it were a hatchet-faced baby.
4. I have, believe me, not been an age in letting you take possession of me; the very first week I knew you I wrote myself your vassal; but burnt the Letter as the very next time I saw you I thought you manifested some dislike to me.
5. The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

I thus purge the passages not of error but of the grader's ~~red~~ marks so that we can re-read them for something other than error, for the qualities we normally expect to find in writing that we read for pleasure. And to get you in the mood for reading the passages this way, let me frankly tell you who the authors are. The man responsible for the sentence fragments and other gaffes in the first passage is Henry David Thoreau. The author of the second is Jane Austen, who regularly used the plural pronoun their with singular antecedents like each and every--a habit she shared with Samuel Johnson, among others. The author of passage 3 was a notorious dangler of modifiers named Herman Melville--and I have to stress the point that this is not an isolated instance; the dangling modifier is practically a feature of Melville's style. The man who misused the semicolon in passage 4 was John Keats; and the fellow who managed to dangle a modifier and mismanage a pronoun in passage 5 was Joseph Conrad in the opening paragraph of the Heart of Darkness. We can now see, incidentally, that Conrad would have been much better off with a semester or two of remedial English--in a section specially designed for foreign students, of course.

Had I but world enough and time, I could extend this list indefinitely--adding Shakespeare, for instance, who in the Merchant of Venice has Antonio writing to Bassanio at one point that "all debts are cleared between you and I" (III.ii.319). My point, however, is not simply to show that even Homer nods, ^{that} everybody make mistakes. I seek rather to show that if we wish to do so, we as readers can read right through errors--not for error but through error--if we want to look for other things. To read passage 1, for instance, in search of pleasure or stimulation is to find not sentence fragments but specificity, vitality, spontaneity, and economy: the specificity of lark, oriole, cockerels and hens; the vitality of the parallel infinitives to crow and cackle; the spontaneity of No yard! and the fine economy of unfenced nature reaching up to your very sills. To read the other passages in search of comparable virtues is to find them. It is to see the fine compression of thought in Jane Austen's

sentence: wished to avoid any survey of the past that might weaken her sister's spirits. It is to see the vividness of Melville's simile: the tomahawk sleeping like a hatchet-faced baby. It is to see the irrepressible vigor of Keats's compound verb phrase actually intensified by the "incorrect" semicolon: wrote myself your vassal; but burnt the Letter. And finally, it is to see the deftness with which Conrad creates a mood of quiet expectation by a series of crisp, decisive clauses and by the simple force of such monosyllabic verbs as swung and wait.

Very well, you will say, what does all this mean for the overworked teacher of English composition facing yet another stack of freshman themes? Does it mean that he or she or we should stop seeing errors altogether? No, it does not; we have a duty to notice errors when they leap out at us, and to help students correct them. A student who misspells words in every sentence should learn how to spell them correctly; a student who does not know the difference between a sentence and a sentence fragment needs to be told. But I do not think we have a duty to read for errors to the exclusion of everything else, or that we have a duty to catch and circle every single error that a student makes.

We have, instead, a more important duty to listen for the sound of a human voice: the kind of voice that makes us read and re-read Keats's mispunctuated letters to Fanny Brawne long after thousands of correctly punctuated letters have found their way to the scrap heap. We have a duty to assume that somewhere among the error-making machines that we call students is the embryo of a writer struggling to be born--yes, just perhaps another Melville, another Conrad, another Jane Austen, or--closer to home--another Annie Dillard, who not so many years ago actually was a student in a writing class taught by a former colleague of mine. If it is folly to dream of such rarities, it is not folly to believe that every student paper may contain at least one sentence that is remarkably good--whatever errors may surround or even penetrate it. Here are three such sentences that I found in freshmen papers this very year--sentences flawed by error and yet

distinguished by rhetorical force, sentences that may incidentally call for the red ink of chastisement and yet much more justifiably call for the green ink of congratulation:

1. The belief that blacks are inferior to whites has yet to dissolve.
2. Walden is an alarm designed to awaken a society rambling on in a deep sleep; a society unaware of the worth of its destiny.
3. In spite of all the sexual temptations, that Odysseus meets in his travels, nothing can ever wrest the thought of Penelope from his heart.

If I'm reading for errors, I pounce upon the misspelling of dissolve in sentence 1; but if I'm reading for other things, I commend the perfection of structure in this complex sentence--its directness, its economy, its telling emphasis on the final words--has yet to dissolve. In sentence 2 the semicolon should be a comma or colon, but do I need to say that, or do I simply commend the student for the vividness of his metaphor? And look at sentence 3--the very last sentence, as it happens, in a paper full of tangled constructions and incoherent paragraphs, a paper written by a student struggling to find his way through a topic that repeatedly confused and frustrated him. Yet at the end of his final paragraph, he came up with this incisive formulation. Of course there should be no comma after temptations, but do I have to tell the student that? Must I refer him to the distinction between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses? Or may I simply congratulate him on the force of the verb wrest, on his mastery of subordinate structure, on the emphatic placement of the main clause, on the fine comprehensiveness of a sentence that perfectly encapsulates the point he has been struggling to express in the whole paper? Surely the most important thing for a teacher to say about this sentence is not that it contains an error, but that it makes a palpable hit.

And that, I think, is what students much more often need to hear. We are

occupationally conditioned to tell them what is wrong with their writing; we are too seldom ready to tell them what is right with it, to show them not only what they can do but already have done. To respond effectively to the writing of our students, I am convinced that we must learn to stop reading doggedly for errors, and start reading eagerly for hits.